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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [IT](#)

SUBJECT: NORTHERN LEAGUE PUSHES TO LEGALIZE ITS VOLUNTEER
PATROLS

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Classified By: CG Daniel Weygandt. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a joint Embassy Rome and Consulate General
Milan cable.

Summary

12. (C) In an environment of pervasive media coverage of
violent crime perpetrated by immigrants (despite a
significant statistical decrease in crime from 2007 to 2008),
the Northern League (LN) has made political hay out of
initiatives to bolster security, including its controversial
initiative to found and promote volunteer neighborhood
security patrols. Reportedly benign "neighborhood watch"
style groups, the patrols are criticized by many as a
mechanism to harass immigrants. Patrols of this kind have a
long tradition in Italy and have been lent support from
different political parties over the years - not just the
Northern League. Embassy and Consulate staff visited a
particularly notorious Turin patrol to assess the phenomenon
at its worst. The patrol had a tight anti-immigrant
ideological bent, and a level of unofficial local police
support, but seemed to primarily serve as an informal
surveillance force for the police. Draft legislation to
legalize the patrols, championed by Minister of Interior
Roberto Maroni (LN), has drawn criticism from the rest of the
center-right governing coalition, including from Berlusconi
himself, as well as the opposition. Still, the patrols are
politically useful for the Northern League and the party will
likely continue to promote them in some form, legal or not.
End summary.

Background - Volunteer Patrols

13. (SBU) The Northern League's dramatic increase in vote
share in the 2008 national parliamentary election (almost
double its 2006 result but still only 8% nationally) came
after a campaign waged largely on the theme of domestic
security. The establishment of new (and highlighting of
pre-existing) volunteer security patrols (called le Ronde
Padane or Patrols of Padania - the fictional "country"
proposed by the Northern League) in cities and towns
throughout Northern Italy were a key publicity tool in the
electoral campaign. These grew out of the Green Shirt
(Camice Verdi) group within the Northern League active in the
mid to late 1990s used to enforce order at public

demonstrations (similar to groups organized by other political parties on both the left and right). Currently, unarmed patrols of volunteers, often organized by local Northern League district offices, circulate through a particular neighborhood. According to the Northern League, these groups walk women to their houses, report the selling of drugs to the police, and by their presence stop petty crimes such as purse-snatching. Critics note that most of the patrols are in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods and allege that they are used mainly to harass immigrants. Other patrols exist both independent of and sponsored by other political parties, but the Northern League patrols have gathered the most recent attention and are believed to be the most numerous. Many, if not the majority, of the Northern League patrols are largely a publicity stunt with little real function. Others work closely with local police. Undoubtedly, a few have also been involved in physical confrontations.

Neighborhood Watch with Muscle? Up Close with a Turin Patrol

14. (C) Milan and Rome Poloffs visited a particularly notorious patrol in the rough, immigrant-heavy San Salvario neighborhood of Turin. By looking at the patrol with one of the worst reputations, we sought to gain insight into the phenomenon at its most excessive. Founded independent of any political party, the San Salvario patrol has been active for more than 15 years and now uses the Northern League district office as its homebase. While a few elderly residents still take part in the patrols, the majority of the force are young, muscled laborers, some recently laid off from factory jobs. The deputy police chief of Turin joined the meeting

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and Northern League leaders referred to him as an informal advisor of the group. He gave a spirited legal defense of the patrols, though only in his personal capacity. The patrol stressed it had excellent cooperation with the police and noted that police responded to their calls in under two minutes on average. They described their work as accompanying women and elderly to their homes in the evening and identifying drug dealers for the police. Still, some comments belied more violent confrontations. One of the older members of the group showed off his numerous scars. He also proudly displayed a dog whistle, saying that certain shopkeepers unleash their dogs to come to his aid when the dogs are stirred by the call. All members of the patrol, and the district Northern League politicians, professed to have received threats from immigrants to their safety and that of their families. Still, they noted that official police patrols have been beefed up and increased (largely by adding Carabinieri forces), and commented that this was having a positive effect. They also showed a collection of fliers handed out by immigrants in the neighborhood with photos of undercover police explaining in Arabic and Italian that they were law enforcement officers.

Northern League Plans for More

15. (C) Turin-based Northern League European Parliamentarian Mario Borghezio, a former leader of the Green Shirts considered an extremist even by his colleagues in the Northern League, shared his thoughts on the necessity of expanding the patrols throughout Northern Italy to Poloffs from Rome and Milan. He described the security situation in Turin as completely out of control and alleged that North African immigrants were bringing in "heavy arms" and hiding them in tunnels under the city. He claimed that certain neighborhoods had criminal snipers on the rooftops to deter and repel law enforcement. He also lamented the infestation of Turin with opium dens. (Note: We dismiss these claims as posturing by an exuberant politician well known for his

exaggeration. Statistics indicate that crime is actually declining in Turin. The total number of crimes--including all minor infractions--committed in the city in 2008 was 150,000, down from 170,000 in 2007. When these statistics were announced at the end of 2008, Antonio De Vita, provincial commander of the Carabinieri said "It is difficult to find another city in which the culture of legality is so strong." End note.) Borghezio stressed that this "dire" situation also exists in other parts of Northern Italy. He maintained the patrols help citizens feel safe in their own neighborhoods. Borghezio's legal consultant laid out a draft strategy for regularizing and recruiting for the local patrols (draft legislation to legalize the patrols sets broad parameters while local authorities would draft implementing guidelines). According to the legal advisor, the patrols should have uniforms, but not armbands or anything that would recall fascist paramilitary groups. While they could not be armed, he thought providing a dog for each group would provide protection and intimidation (he noted explicitly that North Africans are especially terrified of dogs). He stressed that former police or military personnel should head each patrol and that there should be robust training for each group. (Comment: The views of Borghezio and his legal advisor are quite extreme, but seem to resonate with a notable portion of Turin's population. During his visit with the poloffs, Borghezio was frequently stopped in the street and praised by Turin's residents. This is all the more surprising given Turin's reputation as a bastion of the center left. Still, the Northern League vote share almost doubled in the broader Piedmont region from 6.5% in the 2006 parliamentary elections to over 12% in 2008. End comment.)

Looking for Governmental Support

¶6. (C) A bill before Parliament that has the strong backing of Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni, a member of the Northern League, would give the patrols a legal status, outlining members' rights and responsibilities, and even provide some training. Prefect Rodolfo Ronconi, Director of the MOI's Center on Immigration and Frontier Police, told Rome PolOff that MOI would like to develop classes for the patrols, and would particularly encourage former policemen

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and Carabinieri to take part. Ronconi envisioned their role as calling the police and serving as a deterrent. The patrols would have no specific authorities nor would they be attached to a political party. Ronconi acknowledged that the popularity of the patrols was in response to a perception of rising insecurity, not an actual increase in crime, given that crime is declining nationwide and in all of Italy's major cities.

Berlusconi Questions Need for Patrols; Opposition Firmly
Opposed

¶7. (C) The Northern League has pushed its anti-immigrant agenda too far for the rest of the center-right coalition, with Prime Minister Berlusconi's People of Liberty balking at the most extreme measures, and Berlusconi himself criticizing the patrols. Berlusconi told the press in mid-March that he did not see the need for the patrols, adding that the whole issue has given the opposition an excellent tool. Berlusconi said that the Northern League's proposal will look to many as if it wants to replace the police and other forces of order with these volunteers. In fact, the main opposition Democratic Party (PD) indicated its strong opposition to the patrols. PD Member of Parliament Jean-Leonard Touadi told PolOff that "violence must be a monopoly for the state." If there is a security problem, Touadi said, the forces of the

state should be strengthened. He added that PD fears that if these groups are empowered, it will be difficult to disband them.

Comment

18. (C) The Northern League may fall short in its effort to get Parliament's approval for the patrols, but in an environment of perceived rising insecurity, the patrols will be an effective campaign tool for the Northern League in advance of the June European Parliament elections. Continued regular press stories about dramatic criminal cases often involving immigrants will lead many voters to conclude that Italy's cities are becoming more dangerous, and they will appreciate that the Northern League is reacting. Senior Northern League politicians, such as Minister of Interior Maroni, seem to be well aware that the patrols need to be regulated to curb their excesses (and not alienate moderate LN supporters), thus proposals to provide training and include former police and military officials in the patrols. Our contacts tell us that LN is expected to continue to grow across the north, particularly in Piedmont and Veneto, and that the party will stretch even further south than in the 2008 national elections when it did well in Emilia Romagna. The patrols should be seen within this political context. End comment.
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